

## Case studies to enhance graduate employability

### Generalist disciplines

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# Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Generalist disciplines

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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Generalist Disciplines



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## Preface

This is one in a series of case studies to enhance graduate employability. The theme of this case study is:

- Generalist disciplines and employability

The 10 other case studies in the series are on the themes of:

- Employment through multi-national corporations
- Competitive sport, athletes and employability
- Entrepreneurship (graduates in start-up businesses and graduates employed by entrepreneurs)
- Government as employer
- Private higher education and employability implications
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- Indigenous employment and supports
- Focus on graduate attributes
- Emerging careers (preparing students for careers that do not yet exist)

The project took place between January and November 2014. The study was designed to investigate, disseminate and enhance graduate employability. Knight and Yorke (2004) are the world-renowned authorities on graduate employability. They define employability as, “a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (p. 9). In a large part, the role and function of these case studies is to make the implicit strategies and supports for employability explicit for heightened sustainable impact.

Throughout the project, four stakeholder groups have been fully consulted:

- Graduates
- Students
- Employers
- Educators/Career Development Centre professionals

The project data was collected through surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups.

- 1500 surveys were distributed. 821 surveys were submitted for a 55 per cent response rate. 705 surveys were fully completed.
- 86 in-depth interviews/focus groups were conducted, fully transcribed and analysed.

This case study on the context of generalist disciplines is based on interviews and focus groups with 22 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students in internships, educators, career development professionals and employers from one business, three private institutions and five different universities. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.









# INTRODUCTION

In a survey conducted by Graduate Careers Australia (2013), it was highlighted that graduates from the generalist disciplines including “visual\performing arts, life sciences, social sciences, psychology, humanities, architecture, physical sciences, languages, and chemistry were the most likely to have been seeking full-time employment” at the time of the survey. However Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) noted that “graduates of some fields of education can always take longer to find full-time employment than those from other fields, and this slower labour market reflects more the state of the labour market and not the quality of graduates or their study of choice.” (p. 5)

Graduates from generalist disciplines are exposed to several disciplinary frameworks throughout their degree. In turn, graduates can be emboldened with a multi-disciplinary framework through which they experience and perceive others. As articulated by an educator, graduates who undertake a Bachelor of Arts “understand sociology, politics, international relations and policy. Graduates understand the complexity of issues such as domestic violence or Indigenous affairs. Even to the level of having conversations with people in the community where you will encounter stereotypes, our graduates know how to think about why people are like that in a more complex way without passing judgment, and in a way that is sensitive and important, and important in a world-changing way. These stereotypes are easily dismantled with more education.”

Yet graduates do not always recognise the importance and distinctive nature of this mindset. “In a world that is changing so rapidly, to be able to think in a broader way, beyond

just being trained in one area, to understand that these people are part of complicated issues, helps us address how to serve them, and our graduates are well-equipped to do that. But as I said, those are issues that I think students might not realise themselves until they find themselves in a position where they realise they have a wider, broader understanding of context than other people do” (from an interviewed educator). Thus, the interviewed educator stated that the role of generalist discipline educators is to “instill a sense of responsibility. But I guess that just speaks to our responsibilities not just to equip them with the skills that they need, but with the character that will help them succeed too.”

## Case study aims and objectives

- Students – To increase awareness of the importance of engaging in employability initiatives and build-in formalised support for these initiatives.
- Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.
- Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees from generalist disciplines.

## Keywords

- Communication
- Confidence
- Business awareness
- Placements
- Experience
- Networking
- Partnerships

# GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT RATES

Figure 1

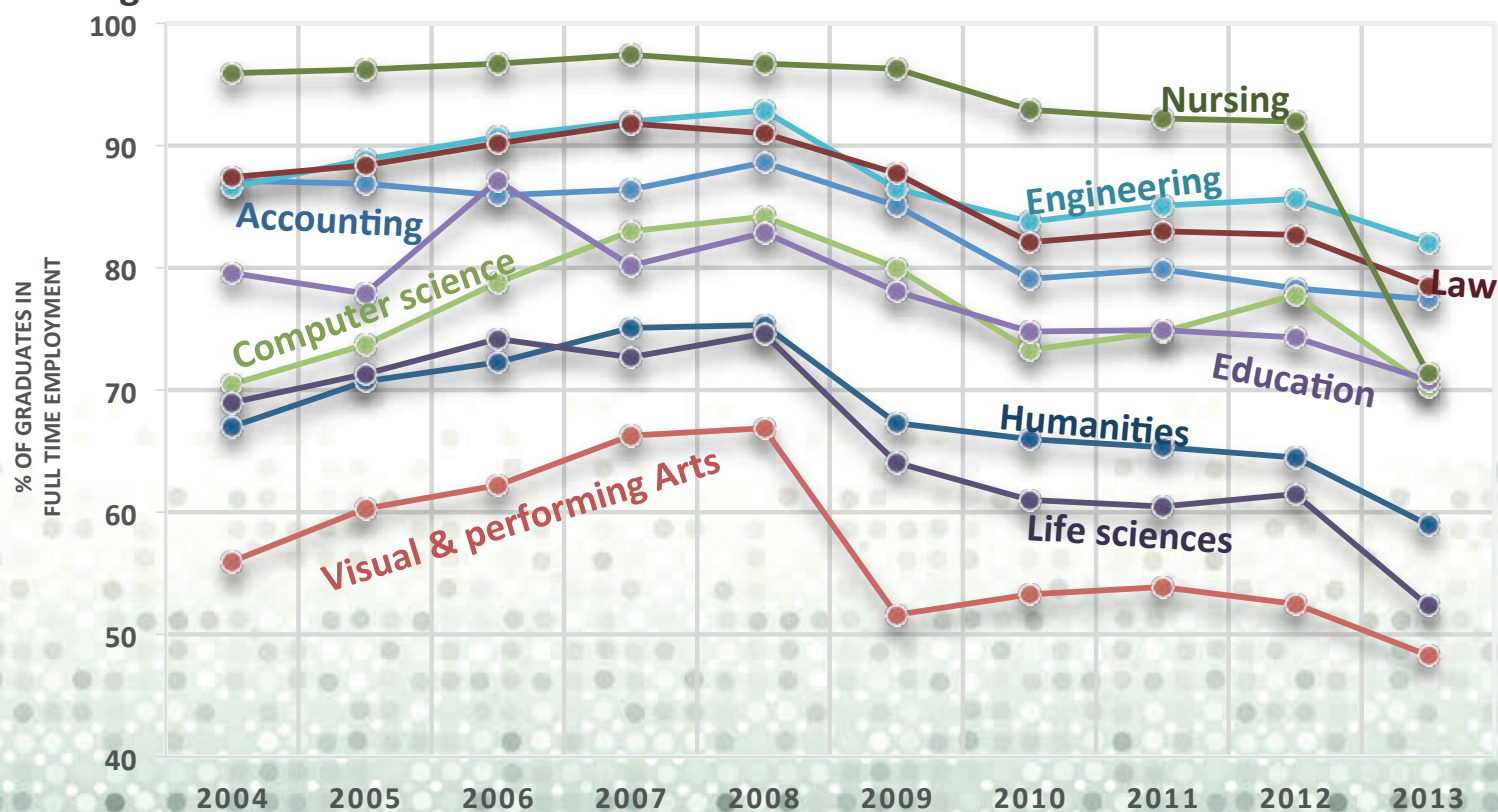


Figure 1 was designed by Professor David Dowling and is based on data that was extracted from the results of graduate surveys undertaken each year by GCA from 2004. It represents information from those graduates who responded to the survey.

GCA lists results for more than forty disciplines. However, for ease of interpretation, data for only ten disciplines is reproduced in the graph. It should be noted that data for some disciplines (e.g. engineering) is aggregated data for the sub-disciplines.

Figure 1 shows consistent trends for all ten disciplines, although the employment rates for each discipline vary. There has been a drop in employment rates since the global financial

crisis and again between 2012 and 2013. Two of the disciplines (architecture and education) exhibit some variation from year to year compared to the other eight disciplines, and nursing dipped further than the other disciplines in 2013.

Figure 1 highlights the employment rates for graduates in the four generalist disciplines as consistently lower than those of the other disciplines.

Research grounding this case study includes engagement with educators, students and graduates in order to determine the successful strategies that can be deployed both within curriculum and beyond to enhance the employability of generalist graduates.

# A TRUE STORY OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES AND EMPLOYABILITY

## How internships and authentic assessment can make graduates employable

My name is Jamie Parfitt and I am a Strategic Planner at AJF Partnership, an advertising agency in Sydney. In this position, I collaborate with the Head of Strategy to lead and assist in the development and implementation of brand and communication strategies for clients. I was the Bond University Valedictorian in 2012. I completed a Bachelor of Multimedia Design 2008-2010 and a Master of Communications 2010-2012, both of which were in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

I appreciated the opportunities of generalist degrees in that a wide range of subjects were available to me, and the broad knowledge, skills and attributes kept my work options open. However, because I wasn't able to claim professional accreditation as would an engineer or a doctor, I had to work harder to define myself, including to employers. There were two factors that helped me stand out among my peers. First, I developed my skill set by completing two internships – one of which was in a New York advertising agency. The second strategy was a book I self-published on Amazon in 2012, while still a student. The book is called – *The Multidimensional Agency: How Marketing 3.0 is Changing the Face of the Advertising Industry*. One of my professors felt that writing traditional university essays was not going to give us the employability skill set we would need to fulfil our graduate goals, especially in a creative field. She

challenged us to scope out a real project that would make a contribution to our chosen fields, help define our graduate identity and help us stand out to employers. This book helped me define myself in work applications and demonstrate that I was serious and committed to this industry. Consequently, as a fresh graduate with no paid work experience, I was able to secure a position typically given to employees with 4-5 years' experience in the field.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES?

Two major themes emerged with respect to the unique nature of employability for students and graduates within the generalist disciplines. The first theme that emerged concerned students choosing their disciplines based upon personal interests, rather than enhancing their employability outcomes. As stated by a student, “my studies reflect my personal interests more than anything, because there is really nothing available in that industry.” Another interviewed student, undertaking a major in business and a major in languages stated, “my study in languages is more of a personal interest. It would be good to get a job in something related to that, but I am aiming to get a job related to my business degree.”

The second theme emerging from interviews was the diversity of graduates undertaking generalist degrees. The Australian government’s widening participation agenda has seen a more diverse group of students enter higher education, and this was reflected among the interviewees as evidenced in this comment from a student: “Getting career advice was daunting because I have been a mother all my life and have not worked, other than part-time jobs here and there. So I wonder, ‘how do I adapt what I have just learned, and how do I apply for these jobs as I have not really had any relevant experience?’”

Employers appeared to understand that students sometimes have to maintain work while studying. As stated by an employer: “Personally I look at whether the student is trying to support themselves and study because often the cost of living, the cost of university, it dictates that people have to work. It is not working ten hours a week, it is working 30 hours a week, and completing a

full-time course. So, a student’s ability to hold down a position that has a reasonable strain on their time, and complete their degree should be taken into consideration when looking at a grade point average. And then you couple that with the effort they put into their application.”

The transferability of the skillset obtained within the generalist disciplines is an important factor when graduates are seeking employment.

## Approach to achieve aims and objectives

- **Students – To increase awareness of the importance of engaging in employability initiatives and build-in formalised support for these initiatives.**

It is important for students to engage with the university employability supports that are made available to them. This may include a host of programs and services such as mentorships from academic staff or industry, internships and work placements, and the careers services available on campus. All of these supports and programs aim to develop the reflective capacity of students in order to highlight the transferable skills that are developed throughout their degree.

- **Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.**

Research participants emphasised the importance of engaging with careers services and industry to expand the range of opportunities available to students. Communicate the available opportunities to students, and contextualise the skills

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES?

that are developed through engaging in co-curricular activities, career engagement, capstones and e-portfolios. Embed reflective practice throughout capstone subjects, to ensure there is a clear link between theory and practice in the real-world.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees from generalist disciplines.**

Engage with universities through careers fairs, industry panels, mentorships and class presentations. Engage with students within the generalist disciplines and communicate the opportunities/positions that are available to them.

## Challenges and their impact

There are three main challenges that persist within the generalist disciplines: the polarity of views regarding the purpose of universities; the disenchantment of students; and initial student resentment of capstone subjects.

One of the contentious issues for generalist disciplines is the disagreement regarding what constitutes *useful knowledge*. Simply put, what is the role and purpose of universities? Some argue that universities are not about producing graduates who can *do a job*, but about promoting life-long learning that transcends the heritage of time as much as it shapes the future. The overall hope is that students conclude their studies as skilled and knowledgeable individuals who can contribute to innovation, be agents of social change and contribute to social vitality. However, some research participants stated their views that education has become a commodity in which students develop a set of skills to prepare them for the workforce. To date, clear links to employability are sometimes

not made within the generalist disciplines. Generalist disciplines seek “not just to equip students with the skills that they need but with the character that will help them succeed too.” (from an interviewed educator)

The second challenge is the overall disempowerment of generalist degree students. According to an educator, “I had to inspire the students, because there was a real sense of disenchantment by the time they were in their third year. There was a sense of real disempowerment as they did not think that they were going to get anywhere.” As articulated by an interviewed graduate, “you are sending out an application and you do not even get a phone call or an interview.” In order to develop and enhance the confidence of students, a graduate expressed that an onus should be placed on educators to assist students in identifying the value of the skills they develop, and their inherent transferability. “I think the university needs to embed skills and confidence into the student. The university needs to be able to provide enough support for a graduate to successfully enter the workforce. These include basic skills, how to write selection criteria, how to interview, how to identify what skills are transferable. The rest is then up to the employer to build and professionally develop that graduate for their organisation.” (from an interviewed graduate)

The final stated challenge within the generalist disciplines is the initial resentment by students of capstone subjects. Some interviewed students expressed resentment over completing capstone subjects as they did not find them relevant to their specific discipline. An educator stated, “when we first introduced the capstone subjects there was a culture whereby students



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES?

were quite resistant to them. And then once it is established I find that the attitude completely changes, and partly that is because the subjects are refined and developed.”

## Successes and their impact

Across the interviews, six strategies were implemented as a means to enhance graduate employability within the generalist disciplines. These strategies are: core and capstone subjects; internships and work placements; class simulations; networking; mentoring; and the use of e-portfolios to develop reflective capacity and to provide tangible evidence of graduate achievement.

### Core and capstone subjects

Core and capstone subjects are an effective means to contextualise theory and provide a ‘transition’ for students. An example of a successful first-year compulsory subject established the aim “to transition students into university”, with final-year capstone subjects seeking to transition students out of the university (from an interviewed educator).

In regards to the capstone subject, the educator stated that “students create a portfolio of what they have done across their degree and reflect on their experiences as a liberal arts student.” These capstone subjects further enhance the students’ abilities “in terms of how to think, personal relationships, team work, critical thinking, reasoning, all of those elements that hold you in good stead in any job” (from an interviewed educator).

Some questions for reflective journals may include; “What has this course given you in terms of transferable skills? Where do you see yourself going next? What further training do you need?” (from an educator).

## Internships/work placements

With graduate positions becoming increasingly competitive, internships/work placements were said to provide a valuable opportunity to obtain industry-relevant experience and help establish networks and contacts within the industry. In recounting a graduate’s experience, an educator stated that through participating in the work placement, the graduate “developed the contacts and the networks” which led to successful employment.

Embedding work-experience modules within curriculum can provide students with greater opportunities and give relevance to the theory taught in classes. Coupled with a reflective portfolio, students may enhance their communication skills and gain a greater understanding of what is required within industry.

### Class simulations

One of the most successful strategies discussed in interviews was a class-simulation that was designed by educators in association with one of the professional bodies in their chosen industry. The aim was to simulate “a typical business environment” in which students were divided “into different groups, given roles such as marketing or finance and are informed of the rules and regulations. Students then bought *raw materials* from each other, took orders from their customers, and produced goods



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES?

based on the specifications of the customer. The goal of the simulation was to increase awareness among students of how these different departments of business function together to make the whole business a success. Not only are students developing a business awareness, “but they are learning how to work with each other.” (from an educator)

These simulations also mimic what graduates encounter at assessment centres whereby graduates “have no clue what you are going to be asked to do, no idea what it is going to be like. You work with people that you have never met before and you have got to make a good impression.” (from an educator)

## Networking

Engagement with professional bodies and industry members is an effective way to provide networking opportunities for students. Such strategies may include inviting professional society members to “deliver a talk to first or second-year students to make them realise the importance of understanding the existence of these societies, and then to take part in their events.” (from an educator)

## Mentoring

Engagement with professionals from industry and the community as mentors was recommended. An educator stated, “There are lots of professionals out there who have given time off work to have a cup of coffee once a fortnight with a student.” Mentors may include councillors, members from professional bodies and industries.

## E-Portfolio

An e-portfolio allows students to reflect upon their achievements and provides a tangible resource to highlight these accomplishments. An e-portfolio may enable students “to reflect across the different domains of their lives” and progressively add to their abilities (from an educator).

# ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

## **Connect with a mentor and be involved in professional associations.**

### *FROM A GRADUATE:*

“I would definitely say the onus was on me to develop employability skills, but my supervisors were really great in terms of networking and providing work-based opportunities. This included my connection to the professional association for which my supervisor was the Vice President. From there I was able to get a research assistant position which then gave me that work experience which led me to my current position.”

## **Presentation and communication skills are important.**

### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Presentation skills are important, because if a student can overcome all of the anxieties around speaking up in a group it helps in an interview, in can help in meetings, it can help engage colleagues. It is a very difficult skill to teach but it is quite a good skill.”

“I think their personality as well in general, it is vital for employers. You might be a first-class student, very intelligent, but if your personality is not appropriate, you are not going to get the job.”

# ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

## Written communication is key.

### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

"I think writing as well is very important and we often underestimate its importance. We often assume it is something that students learn in the first-year composition class. I think the difference between a first-year student who has successfully completed, and a graduate who has learned how to synthesise, analyse, express succinctly and edit in a polished way is just enormous."

## Communication and problem-solving.

### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

"Graduates have got to have the confidence. I mean that seems to me to be the number one thing. After that they also need to tick the other boxes. Employers of math graduates will ask about problem solving, they will ask about excel skills, programming. But if they do not have good communication skills, then they are sadly not going to get their foot in the door."

## Employable characteristics.

### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

"To my mind, some of the characteristics that employers look for is the ability to think independently, the ability to act with integrity and professionalism, the ability to respect and identify with other cultures. The top skills tend to revolve around written and oral communication, problem solving, teamwork, and the ability to manage time."

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

### **Develop a systematic approach to providing opportunities.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Our students have done amazing things. Every year for the last three years we’ve sent a student on Global Voices, where they have gone to the United Nations and they have met world leaders. We have sent students on to Oxford, we have sent students on to the Australian National University for the prestigious summer research scholarships, and they often stumble into those things. We tell students of these opportunities, but I think a more systematic exposure to the types of amazing opportunities that are out there would be great.”

### **Start early.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“I do not think that we do enough earlier on to get students to think about what sorts of jobs a generalist can do, and the sorts of postgraduate diploma options that are available to them.”

### **Engage with community organisations.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“We also hold a volunteer expo. So that includes community organisations that need volunteers, and members will come in and talk to our students about how they could work with them. Our own students go out and set up their own agency, for want of a better word. One of our alumni set up an organisation, and because she is an alumni she will take our students into the program as well.”

### **Highlight professional practice.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“I have recently made a video, with a colleague of mine, on interviews. We recorded two videos: a good interview and a bad interview. My colleague interviews me, including questions which tend to be asked at graduate job interviews. Students realise, ‘Oh yeah, that is the sort of thing I might have said, or not have realised that is a trap I could have fallen into’. This helps show students how they can prepare for an interview.”

### **Engage with alumni.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Alumni are really important. Alumni links develop relationships with organisations that post placements, and as a practical way forward I think that it is where some of the generalist fields may look to.”

# ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

## Engage with universities.

### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“The employers’ responsibility begins a lot earlier than most employers recognise. If employers are looking for work-ready graduates, and I am speaking in general, recognising that some particular employers do this very well already, they should be engaging with universities to ensure that they are providing opportunities for students to participate in their workplaces, to have structured learning opportunities and that could be through a range of different programs. That could be adapted into different disciplines, different industry contexts but the full gamut of work placements, internships, summer school projects. Having said that, there should be an acknowledgment and a respect that the purpose of the university degree is not to just provide a work-ready graduate but there are other aspects of what makes a complete graduate. Universities have a responsibility to instill these graduate aspects in their students and so it should not be the case that course content is determined solely by what skills are needed in a workplace at a particular point in time.”

## WHAT'S NEXT?

# SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Higher impact sustainability can be accomplished through dedicating more financial and human resources to internships, placements and work experiences. In the survey research, the literature was systematically reviewed to derive strategies for which there was empirical evidence for positive impact on employability. Twelve strategies emerged (listed here in alphabetical order):

- capstone/final semester project
- careers advice and employment skill development
- extra-curricular activities
- graduate portfolios, profiles & records of achievement
- international exchange
- mentoring
- networking or industry information events
- part-time employment
- professional association membership/engagement
- social media/networks
- volunteering/community engagement
- work experience/internships/placements

The survey questions were articulated as follows on the four stakeholder versions of the surveys.

- Students – What strategies are you using to improve your graduate employability?
- Graduates – What strategies did you use to improve your employability?
- Higher Education Personnel – Which of the following employability strategies do you provide for students?

- Employers – Which of the following strategies undertaken by students does your organisation value when recruiting graduates?

By a substantive margin, the strategy to be selected on the greatest number of survey responses was:

### **Work experience/internships/placements**

One of the strongest themes within the generalist disciplines case study was the importance of core and capstone subjects as a means to contextualise and link to real-world practice. This incorporates assessment items such as reflective journals and e-portfolios which enhance the reflective capacity of students, and provide students with an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences and developed skill set. As articulated by an educator, “it is not just adding it into a program, and calling it embedded into the curriculum, it is actually embedding it into the curriculum and making it relevant to the subject that the students are studying.”



# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and Resources

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## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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The list of names and organisations is a partial list, as some interview and focus group participants requested that they remain anonymous.

## Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- What impact has the move in Australia to a demand-driven system for universities had on the nature of generalist degrees?  
Discuss in relation to this quote:  
“Increasing and broadening Australians’ opportunities to attend university is central to Universities Australia’s vision for a smarter Australia. Increasing participation in higher education is not only necessary for restructuring the economy, meeting

the need for a more highly educated workforce, and diversifying our industrial base, but also contributes to a fairer society.”

- A generalist degree is believed to provide graduates with flexibility to create opportunities. What are some of the ways graduates can maximise the skills of generalist degrees to enhance employability?
- What strengths can a generalist degree contribute in a globalised world where international experience informs future potential?

Discuss in relation to the following quote: “Australian universities need to develop a more global curriculum. They need to improve the support offered to international students in both English language skills and campus safety. Universities should aim to increase the number of Australian students who study overseas for part of their course, making Australian graduates and universities more global in orientation. Capturing this opportunity requires continued effort from universities and facilitative policy from government. International higher education is at a critical juncture and competition is increasing rapidly.”

